Introduction

The group Sikhs for Justice proposed a non-binding referendum in 2020 to “liberate Punjab, currently occupied by India,” as a precursor to the effort to initiate a binding referendum in the United Nations on the question; voting is underway as the final edits are being made on this essay. Although the language on the website for this initiative speaks of Punjab, it is clear that this is about the question of Khalistan: as stated in the FAQ on the site, this referendum will help “to resolve the question of Khalistan,” and the organizers note that their target of getting five million votes for an independent Punjab is “set to show the UN the will amongst the Sikh community for independence of Punjab justifying UN intervention.” The emergence of this referendum is not a surprise: while the movement for Khalistan was thought by many observers to be forgotten after the late 1990s, it never faded from memory, particularly within Sikh communities in the diaspora outside of India. Its expansion and greater visibility in the last decade demonstrate this. The voting form, available on the referendum website, states clearly who can participate: people of any religion living in the Indian Punjab (or, the occupied Punjab, as the form describes it) and Sikhs living outside of the state: the form clearly states that: “pūrī dunīāṅ ’c vassde sikkh vo ṭ pā sakaṇge Sikhs living anywhere in the world can vote.” The referendum is thus framed to give the Sikh diaspora community outside of India a say in the question—not the Punjabi diaspora as a whole. This is striking; residence in Punjab does not seem to be a requirement for “Punjabi self-determination”—but it is a requirement for those who are not Sikh. The framing of the 2020 referendum initiative in terms of the Indian Punjab as a whole, as well as in relation to Khalistan, and with specific additional voting rights given to members of the Sikh community, is notable, since Sikhs hold only a 57% majority in the Indian state of Punjab and therefore cannot be said to constitute the population as a whole. While the goal of the referendum is to gain international support for a binding referendum, it is clear at the time of the writing of this chapter, however, that at least so far the referendum has not garnered the international support hoped for, with a reported declaration from Global Affairs Canada, the country’s Foreign Ministry, that “Canada respects the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of India, and the Government of Canada will not recognize the referendum” (Bhattacharyya 2020).
To understand this referendum, it is necessary to understand the larger struggle between the federal centre and state autonomy in the postcolonial state of India and the politics of both majoritarianism and minoritization within political culture in the country since the 1970s. These issues have only become more urgent since the Bharata Janata Party came to power in 2014. The claim to Punjab that lies at the foundation of the idea of Khalistan—and the referendum itself—however, is often framed not as a contemporary political question but as a question of history: it is undergirded by a connection between the Sikhs and the Punjab that is framed in historical terms. For Harjot Oberoi, writing in 1987, that correlation is wholly modern and new: he argued then that “it was only in the 1940s, when the demand for Pakistan was articulated by the Muslim League, and when the cold truth dawned that the Punjab might after all be divided that the Sikhs with a tragic desperation began to visualize the Punjab as their homeland” (Oberoi 1987: 27). As such, he argued, the “affective attachment with the Punjab among the Sikhs is fairly recent, and it does not date back to the early annals of the Sikh community” (Ibid.). Yet, while it is true that the notion of Punjab in national-territorial terms is new, since the idea of the nation-state itself is modern, such a position does not take into account the long history of the affective attachment to Punjab among Sikhs, as well as other Punjabis. This existing abiding attachment to Punjab (and a larger landscape of the Sikh community) was, at the same time, fundamentally reconfigured in the colonial period and thus cannot be seen as a “natural” or unbroken continuation of what came before.

The aim of the present chapter is to address the historical underpinnings of the Sikh connection to Punjab through a broad set of questions: What are the historical foundations of this connection and of more terrorialized understandings of the Sikh community? Is this perceived connection a purely modern phenomenon, or does it draw on longer affinities and loyalties? And, perhaps most importantly, how has it changed over time? This chapter addresses these questions through exploration of the historical production of the representation of the past in Sikh contexts, from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. It does so, however, with full awareness of the enduring relevance of these issues in the present. The chapter ends, therefore, with consideration of what the answers to these questions can, and cannot, tell us about our political present. The referendum and associated political mobilization with which the chapter opened demonstrate the ongoing importance of these issues.

This chapter will show that the past and its representation were a particular concern for the Sikh community prior to the nineteenth century, when the British established control of the region in mid-century, and that the representation of the Sikh past in the precolonial period was both connected to the landscape of Punjab and also exceeded it. The imagination of the physical landscape of the community was never strictly coterminous with Punjab, and the landscape of the Gurus was far larger. At the same time, transformations in the imagination of the past and its relationship to the articulation of the “community” in the agonistic religious environment of colonial rule engaged a set of transformations of this existing historical imaginary and its physical landscape. This led to the territorialization of Sikh pasts in new ways in the colonial period that have had an enduring impact, shaping postcolonial developments even as they have operated as only one way of imagining that landscape in the diverse thought and practice of Sikh tradition. This discussion represents in abbreviated form the core arguments of my monograph (Murphy 2012), augmented by more recent research, as cited.

**Imagining a Sikh landscape**

We know that Punjab as a place was imagined in powerful ways by its diverse residents—Muslim, Hindu, and others—long before the language of the region and its political and cultural
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centre at Lahore was recognized by the Delhi-based poet and disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya, Amir Khusrau, who refers to “Lahauri” as the language of the people around Lahore in 1317–18 (Faruqi 2003: 819). As I highlighted in my 2012 monograph, the Punjabi landscape is marked by sites that claim a historical link to the Sikh Gurus, and the Sikh Gurus themselves founded sites as they built their community of followers (“Sikh” is derived from the Punjabi verb “sikhnā,” to learn) over the course of the sixteenth and to early eighteenth centuries (Murphy 2012). The sacred geography of the Sikh tradition as a whole is comprised of the congregational sites associated with the Guru, known as gurdwārās, established among the dispersed communities that constitute the tradition, often located along trade routes and in small as well as large urban centres. The gurdwara took central stage in the early formation of the Sikh community in direct reference to its name—the doorway (duārā or duārā) to the Guru (or under the related designation dharamshāla).

Early mentions of the “doorway to the Guru” do not necessarily reflect the institutional sense of the term as it later develops: Guru Nānak spoke of “sacu sālāhī duārāṅ gurduāru”: “That blessed doorway to the Guru, where there is praise of Truth,” and the Third Guru, Amardas, spoke of coming before the Guru—“devaṇ vāle kai hathi dāti hai gurū duārāi pāi”: “The gift is in the hands of the giver. It is received at the doorway to the Guru.” The site of access to the Guru was foundational to the community forming around him, in a spiritual as well as institutional sense, and the reverence for the site of the Guru came to be extended to those that were related to the Guru in the past—and were remembered in early histories and other texts. These sites grew in their institutional formality during the period of the Sikh Gurus and after, particularly with the acquisition of political power by Sikhs in the late eighteenth century, and they were located along important intersections and trade routes and within communities gathered around the Gurus. A gurdwara in general terms is now any site that provides access to the Guru (now, the Guru-as-text, after the tradition of embodied human Guruship ended in the beginning of the eighteenth century), at which the community gathers in worship and memory. But many of these early gurdwaras were linked directly to the history of the Gurus in the region. The landscape of Punjab (both Indian and Pakistani and beyond) today remains populated by such itihāsik or “historical” gurdwaras associated with the Sikh Gurus. In my earliest work on this subject, I utilized the term “territory” to describe this mapping of Sikh pasts and presents onto the landscape; now, I would eschew such a term, with its too-easy associations with state formation and particularly the nation-state form, and would instead call this Sikh “place-making” (Murphy 2007).

It is crucial to remember that the revered Sikh landscape was broad and did not map to the Punjab as a region: it encompassed the landscape traversed by Guru Nānak in his period of udāsī (where the term refers to a period of renunciation during which the Guru travelled widely), for example, before he settled in a newly founded location for his community, called kartārpūr, or “city of God.” As such, the landscape of the Guru stretched from Baghdad, to Benares, and beyond. Sikh place-making encompasses all the locations touched by the Gurus, some of whom travelled widely, such as Guru Tegh Bahadur; Nander, one of the five takhat or centres of authority within the administrative structure of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (discussed subsequently), is in Maharashtra, commemorating the location of the death of the tenth Guru.

The historical gurdwara landscape structures memory in relation to place and, in so doing, helps to constitute Sikh religious experience and its ongoing engagement with the past in the present. Through the gurdwara, visual culture, architecture and material culture come together with the history of the tradition. We see this vividly today in the sculpture park at Mehdiana in Ludhiana District (in the Indian Punjab), where the historical paintings so commonly displayed in museums associated with gurdwaras come to life in three dimensions, displaying the sacrifices of members of the Sikh community through history (and particularly in the turbulent eighteenth century). The marking of memory on a sacred landscape in relation to a specifically
Sikh historical imaginary, however, is not singular: it accompanies a history being marked out through object and described in text, interlinked representations that make up the landscape in different ways. And this set of representations is not modern, even though much of its current structure is defined by modern administrative forms.

**Early forms of representation of the Sikh past**

Early forms of representations of the Sikh past are found in the *janam-sākhī* literature, literally the “witnessings of the birth/life” of the first and founding Guru, Guru Nānak, although the historicity of these texts is open to question due to their inclusion of miraculous elements (McLeod 2000: 38). This set of texts provides is evidence of the importance of the narration of the life of the Guru in relation to the formation of the Sikh community. This type of orientation towards the past blossoms in the eighteenth century, when the period of living human-embodied Guruship ends with the death of the Tenth and final human-embodied Guru in 1708, and the *granth* or text takes centre stage as the conceptual leader of the community or *panth*. We see in tandem with this literary florescence a significant expansion in material mnemonic and representational practices oriented towards the telling of the Sikh past. Two related genres of textual production in this period demonstrate this interface between textual historiographical traditions and the material culture of memory. One of these is the genre known as the *gurbilās*, or “the play of the Guru”; the other is known as the *rahit*, a body of texts that, in some cases, feature narrative portions reminiscent of the Gurbilās but otherwise represent ideals and imperatives on behaviour and belief for members of the evolving Sikh community, particularly in the form of the Khalsa, the orthodox form of Sikh practice promulgated by Guru Gobind Singh at the end of the seventeenth century (Dhavan 2011; Murphy 2007, 2012; Vig 2020). The historical orientations that emerged in these and related forms (such as the *bansāvalāṅ* and *gurpranālāṅ*) in the eighteenth century drew upon a wide range of antecedents and were influenced by a range of contemporary sources in Persian, Sanskrit, and other vernacular languages (Dhavan 2011; Fenech 2008, 2013; Murphy 2007, 2012; Rinehart 2011; Vig 2020).

There are also objects revered for their connection to history. These can be called “relics,” and often are, utilizing the English term. But a Punjabi equivalent is not available to that term; the objects in question are most often described in Punjabi as *ithāsik vastūāṅ* (“historical objects”) and *shastar vastar* (“weapons and clothes”) in texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which lists of them were compiled. They have been collected, (sometimes) displayed, and revered for their connection to the Sikh Gurus and other important persons in the tradition. There is a wide range of objects that we can call by this name: clothing, shoes, chariots, and weapons. Weapons are the most common example of the type, collected and displayed in gurdwaras across Punjab and beyond: they have been daily displayed and described at the Akal Takhat in Amritsar, for example, as well as at Takhat Sachkhand Sri Hazur Abchalnagar Sahib in Nanded, Maharashtra, the *takhat* associated with the death of Guru Gobind Singh. Other objects are found outside of India; the family that possesses the Ganga Sagar, an urn said to have been gifted by the Tenth Guru to a family loyal to him, is based in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Some objects are revered because they have been used by the Guru, others for having been gifted by him. At the village of Chakk Fatih Singhwala near Bathinda, Punjab, the family of Jasbir Singh holds objects of both types: a *manjī* or cot that the Tenth Guru was said to have sat upon; a *tawā*, or large cooking surface, which is said to have belonged to a woman in the family, Mai Desaan, and was used by her to make bread for the Guru; a low chair, said to have belonged to Mai Desaan and upon which the Guru’s wife, Mata Sahib Devi, sat; and a silk *dastār* of Guru Gobind Singh and other clothing belonging to the Guru and his wife that were...
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given to the family. The remembrance of the Guru at the site today revolves around the service of Mai Desaan; she served the Guru and is remembered and honoured for this. Objects can thus reveal many things: relationships between the Guru and followers, relationships with members of the Gurus’ families (at Manji Sahib in Kiratpur, the embroidery of the Sixth Guru’s daughter is kept), and the nature of the sangat or community itself and the service that joined and joins them together around the Guru. They are also linked to places and to histories of interaction and presence in them. The Bhais of Bagrian, in another example, have a collection of objects from the Guru that represent the mandate they were given to provide langar to the community at Bagrian (Singh, S. and Singh, R. 2012). The objects that were gifted by the Gurus, therefore, speak about the relationship of the family to the Guru. They also further reflect the ongoing status of the family in the community in religious, political, and social terms, as the religious specialists associated with the Phulkian states of eastern Punjab (Murphy 2012: chs. 1, 2, 8).

But what of Punjab in this historical landscape of the Sikh community as articulated through text, object, and site? Even though the landscape of the Guru moved beyond Punjab, we do see an emergent notion of Punjab as a region in the period of the emergence of the Sikh tradition and within Sikh texts. For example, in the Braj seventeenth-century text the Bachitar Nāṭak, attributed to the tenth Guru and contained within the Dasam Granth, “madara desh” seems to refer roughly to Punjab, and it is linked to the founding of the Sodhi and Bedi clans, the lineages associated most prominently with the Gurus (Murphy 2018):

The Sodhi king of Madra sent letters to them, entreating them to forget past enmities. The messengers sent by the king came to Kashi and gave the message to all the Bedis. All the reciters of the Vedas came to Madra Desha and made obeisance to the King.10

Here we do seem to see a sense of new kinds of “culture boundaries” (in Sheldon Pollock’s words) that Pollock has argued are associated with the emergence of the vernacular; this does not rely solely upon the formal designation of the Lahore province in the Mughal administration to describe the region of the Indus and its tributaries mentioned in earlier literature. These boundaries also exceed it; they do not here map to the emergence of a regional polity at that time (Pollock 2006: 383 and elsewhere).11 This was not, however, only a feature of Sikh cultural production. For example, we can also see the region’s emergence in Waris Shah’s mid-eighteenth-century rendition of the story of the star-crossed lovers, Hīr and Rānjhā, perhaps the most quintessentially Punjabi text one might identify. Waris Shah opens his classic version of the story, Hīr, in praise of the Lord, the Prophet, and the Sufi saints who were so important to the cultural landscape of Punjab, creating Punjab as an Islamic landscape (with variations between the Shahmukhi or Perso-Arabic and Gurmukhi printed versions of the text):

The beloved of Moinuddin (of Ajmer), the Chishti Pir, he is full as a treasury of pure sweetness,
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He is the perfection of the Chisht lineage, whose city has become civilized (ma’mūr) as a town of mendicants.

He is the perfect saint among the 22 poles (kutabāṅ) [that guide the world], whose renunciation and humility is accepted by all,

Shakar-Ganj has come and made this his home (muqām), dispelling the sadness and pain of Punjab.

In Waris Shah, the territory or vilāyat of the saint is described, locating Punjab as a distinctive region and simultaneously making it a part of a far broader Islamic imaginary. Farina Mir has highlighted how regional imaginaries prevailed within the qissā or story of Heer and Ranjha in the colonial period to define a territoriality that “emphasizes the affective attachments people established with the local, and particularly their natal places” (Mir 2010: 123), where Punjab “emerges . . . as an imagined ensemble of natal places within a particular topography (rivers, riverbanks, forests and mountains) and religious geography (Sufi shrines and Hindu monasteries)” (Mir 2010: 134). This is a mapping of Punjab: Jhang, Takhat Hazara, Tilla Jogian, Rangpur; the places that are enlivened by the always repeated story of Hīr–Rāṅjhā, fixed in time and place in this region, alongside the histories and stories associated with the Sikh Gurus and other figures with diverse religious affiliations. We can see in Waris Shah’s version of the text that this mapping pre-dates the British arrival. We thus see that Punjab as a place and a cultural sensibility mattered, percolating through texts that were diverse in their linguistic and religious formations—and occasionally but not always reflective of a Punjabi vernacular linguistic form (Murphy 2019b).

At the same time, such localizing and place-making discourses were also multivalent, in the Sikh context and beyond. In Waris Shah’s eighteenth-century text Hīr, for example, we see both localizing forces—often expressed through political conflicts and attendant relationships between Punjab and adjacent regions and often invoked to denote conflict or tension between men and women—just as we have a capacious embrace of cross-regional narrative traditions and references (Murphy forthcoming). The same was true for the landscape of the Sikh past, where we see the simultaneous appearance of both localizing and broadening discourses for the imagined landscape of the Sikh community, as has been discussed. The Punjab was important, but it was not coterminous with the landscape of the emergent Sikh (or any other religious) tradition; such traditions exceeded boundaries and borders in diverse ways.

Moving from a precolonial to colonial frame

We have seen that the imagination of the Sikh landscapes has been linked to the establishment of congregational sites—the gurdwara—associated with the past of the Gurus and the community and linked to its ongoing life. In the pre-British period, gurdwaras and other religious sites were provided for by the state as a type of property as dharamarth (“for the purpose of dharma”); in Islamic legal terms, they were known as “madad-i-ma’ash,” or wāqaf, for charitable donations. They were designated thus as a broad type in relation to the state, a kind of property that operated across religious traditions and vocabularies of governance. The evidence from South Asia demonstrates that the intervention of the precolonial state in the support of religious institutions was not driven by purely religious motivations, such that we can assume Muslim rulers were primarily patrons of Muslim sites, for example, because of devotional or sectarian interests. Such grants were instead a key aspect of state formation. As Irfan Habib notes, in the Mughal period “the state had its own interest in maintaining this class [of religious grantees]. . . . The grantees were . . . [the empire’s] natural apologists and propagandists . . . [and] a
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The bastion of conservatism, because they had nothing except their orthodoxy to justify their claims on the state’s bounty” (Habib 1963: 355)16 The Mughal emperor Jahangir defined these individuals as members of “the army of prayer,” and this army contained non-Muslims alongside Muslims (a sensibility that continued under successors to the Mughals).17

There was a political nature to land rights in general in the precolonial period, as well as to religious grants.18 When lands were granted to individuals and or institutions, the rights to occupancy and cultivation of such lands were left intact; the recipient gained access to revenue from the land rather than “ownership.”19 Thus, as Brian Caton has observed, the sanads or documents issued to protect rights to control of land were political rather than legal documents, the former designating political rights and relationships to land and the latter an objective relationship to land as property.20 As it was for Mughal land tenure, so it was in post-Mughal Punjab, where Andrew Major argues that “under Sikh rule landownership was not simply a question of abstract principles or time-honoured rights and responsibilities. It was, rather, a highly political question involving the strength and fiscal imperatives of the state on the one hand and the resilience or adaptability of the cultivating communities on the other” (Major 1996: 20). Understanding of rights to land changed dramatically under British rule. This shift has been described by Walter Neale as one of being from political control, with land as territory that is ruled, in the Mughal and post-Mughal view, to land as something that can be owned, in the eyes of the British (Neale 1969: 6).21 Revenue payment within the post-Mughal Lahore state established by Ranjit Singh gave a person the right to control a piece of land in order to continue its productivity, so that the payment of revenue was fundamentally connected to control; failure to perform through payment would compromise one’s right to land (Caton 2003: 154ff.; Neale 1985: 955).22 The ensuing change engaged by the British reflected, in the words of Radha Sharma, a “British inability to free themselves of the notion of an absolute and exclusive form of proprietorship when interests in land were traditionally [in the Lahore state] multiple and inclusive” (Sharma 2000: 177).23

More directly relevant to our concerns here was the status of the “religious grant,” a category of property that operated across religious communities. A crucial distinction that comes into play in the later management of religious sites under the British concerns the recipients of such grants: Were they individuals or corporate bodies? This was a significant question in the Mughal period as well, as evidenced by the transition under Akbar to the recognition of institutions as recipients over individuals. This ensured the continuance of grants, since institutions in theory persisted far beyond the lifespan of an ordinary person (Mukherjee and Habib 1987). Hindu temples were central to state formation, such that “a donation to Brahmans, monks or temples represented an investment in agrarian territoriality” (Ludden 1999: 80).

There is not, however, one single monolithic “law of endowments” in Hindu traditions, Arjun Appadurai notes, because “the activities of Hindu kings in respect to temples were ‘administrative’ and not ‘legislative,’ [as later British colonial control would be,] and because their resolutions were context specific and not absorbed into a general body of evolving case law” (Appadurai 1981: 169). According to Gregory Kozlowski, “when the Mughal empire entered its long decline in the first decades of the eighteenth century, most of those striving to become its heirs shared similar attitudes about the nature of property” (Kozlowski 1985: 27). The confirmation of prior religious grants by later Sikh chiefs reflects such a dynamic (Goswamy and Grewal 1967: 38).24

The status of historical gurdwaras in the precolonial state system is less clear, reflecting both the complex ways in which precolonial property formations did not map directly to those instituted during British rule and the less established place for Sikh sites within state systems in the earlier period. Land grants were said to have been made to the Sikh community in the
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early period of the tradition, when the Gurus established their centres throughout Punjab. These, however, are generally unattested in the Mughal imperial record, and we have little or no independent historical evidence for them. The dharamarth records of the Khalsa Darbar, or the court of the Lahore state under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (ruled 1799–1839), do provide, however, a sense of how pre-British logics of management of gurdwaras alongside other religious sites were implemented. The records demonstrate first the political nature of such grants and their need for confirmation. The grants were clearly gathered together in 1849 at the time of annexation and, in their present form in the Punjab State Archives in Chandigarh, constituted not a diachronic and comprehensive record of past practices but a set of claims being made before the new rulers, the East India Company: As political documents, such grants had to be affirmed by the new political order. For both Sikh and non-Sikh sites, religious grants under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, as well as among earlier and contemporary Sikh chiefs, were modelled along the lines of those of the Mughal court. Individuals—or rather lineages of individuals—are named as recipients, so that a grant might become quasi-hereditary (Sachdeva 1993: 122–123).

Prominent among them were members of families connected to the Sikh Gurus, who were given sometimes extensive patronage. Alongside these and other Sikh recipients, such as granthī or Sikh textual specialists, Hindu religious specialists and Muslim shrines and saints as well were honoured with grants and past grants confirmed; thus in the Khalsa Darbar records, entire volumes were dedicated to sādhīs and udāsīs (Bundle 5, Volume 2), Brahmins and purohit (Bundle 5, Volumes 5 and 7), sayyids and faqīrs (Bundle 5, Volume 11), and “famous Sardars and dependents” (Bundle 5, Volume 12).

The dharamarth records of the Khalsa Darbar reveal the logic of such grants as a set of claims made before the colonial state, based in persons and lineages, rather than focused on sites themselves. The overwhelming majority of grants in the corpus are structured the same way, with indication of the recipient or recipients of a grant and their heritage: the father and grandfather of a recipient are named, or, in the case of disciples, the lineage of teachers. Most of the Khalsa Darbar grants then detail the history associated with the grant under consideration, also providing a brief history of associated grants and their confirmation, usually with reference to Maharaja Ranjit Singh or his successors, Kharak Singh, Sher Singh, or Dalip Singh. For all but the first volume in the extant collection, the organizing principle is based on the designation of individuals or groups of people as recipients, under broad categories associated with their lineage (e.g., descendant of the Guru), caste (Brahmin), or role (sādhī, udāsī, purohit, faqīr). (The first volume of the series declares itself to be about the granth sāhibān, or the esteemed texts, but of the 27 grants listed even there, however, the overwhelming majority clearly define an individual or individuals as the recipients.) Two volumes are recorded as “miscellaneous,” and these volumes too indicate individual recipients of grants, without much detail on the reasons for the grants or the specific roles associated with grantees.

How, then, was the Darbar Sahib or Harmandir Sahib (known popularly in English as the Golden Temple)—one of the most important of Sikh institutions—treated, and how were grants related to it assigned? This site provides an important case for consideration along these lines. To it was dedicated an entire volume in the Khalsa Darbar records (Bundle 5, Volume 8). The Khalsa Darbar records, however, in their current form, overwhelmingly indicate that individuals were given grants rather than the Darbar Sahib itself. Of the total 115 grants in the corpus (and an additional narrative about a granthī who had lost his rights), all but 4—made out to the Akal Bunga, located on the site of the Darbar Sahib, rather than to the Darbar Sahib itself—are made out to individuals.

The Darbar Sahib provides a compelling example of this transition in property and the logic of ownership that impacts the status of the gurdwara under colonial rule. When the Darbar
Sahib came under the control of the British administration of Punjab, it was managed through a committee. The appointed managing committee framed a set of rules and regulations for the Golden Temple’s administration, entitled the *Dastur-ul’ Amal*, in which ownership was defined as follows: “the sole proprietor of this sacred institution for ever is Guru Ramdass: no person else has any title to proprietorship. The claim to the noviciate or chelaship belongs to the whole ‘Khalsa’ body. The Pujaris and others receive their wages from the offerings according to their appointed dues for service performed.” As we have seen, this does not follow the previously established model for the designation of proprietorship at a site. In the precolonial period, under Ranjit Singh and his successors, individual service providers received grants; only rarely did institutions within the Darbar Sahib (i.e. the Akal Bunga) do so. With the early British period document, which identifies the Guru as the continuing proprietor of the site and the Khalsa as his *chelā* or disciple, we see a transition into the management by the community as a whole, as a defined body, the contours of which can be delineated. This represents a fundamental change, and it is one that resonates through Sikh political and religious mobilization through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drawing on precolonial antecedents but changing them significantly. This document is not unusual; as the next section of this chapter will show, it reflects a general orientation to the management of religious sites that developed in British administration. It draws on an already existing collective imaginary—the Khalsa—but articulates it with reference to the control of sites in a way that we have not seen in precolonial examples. This is why in the *hukamnāme*, or orders of the Guru, collected and edited by Ganda Singh, the term Khalsa is used to address the community as a whole, in capacious terms—it was clearly an important way of articulating the emerging consciousness of the community, as can be seen in texts like *Gur Sobhā*, from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards—but orders are not issued in an institutional sense, on behalf of the Khalsa corporate body, until after 1850, when the Golden Temple’s administration had been framed in the *Dastur-ul’ Amal* with reference to the community of the Khalsa as owner (Ganda Singh 1999: 233–236). The language of the community and its relationship to formal institutional authority—and territory—began to take shape in a new way at this time. This was accelerated by broader transformations in the management of religious sites in British India that contributed further to a territorialized imaginary of the community.

**The production of a Sikh understanding of territory**

The debate over the administration of religious sites in colonial India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the articulation of this debate with specific reference to the management of Sikh gurdwaras, deeply influenced how territory was framed in relation to Sikh identity and history. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the British Crown had attempted to reconfigure its relationship with religious sites that, according to the various regulations passed in the presidencies in the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was obligated to manage. The divestment of government control in some cases remained more of an ideal than a reality. But it was a powerful ideal, and the government was obligated to define administrative mechanisms for religious sites that would allow it to divest itself of explicit and direct control. This process, at the same time, provided for (and, indeed, enforced) machinery that accorded with colonial formulations of the distinctions between religious and secular institutions and discourses and particular understandings of the relationships between specific religious communities and places.

The British had become deeply involved in the management of religious institutions in India in the eighteenth century, and regulations designed to provide for government support of religious institutions were passed in 1810, 1817, and 1827 in Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, respectively. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a range of actions meant
to modify this involvement. The Religious Endowments Act of 1863 was passed to allow the Board of Revenue to withdraw from active oversight of religious sites and specifically to undo the precedents set by these earlier regulations, which, according to the 1810 regulation, allowed that “support of mosques, Hindoo temples, colleges, and for other pious and beneficial purposes, and of all public buildings” be vested in the Board of Revenue and Board of Commissioner in the districts subject to the control of each. The 1863 Act therefore provides the context for the Gurdwara Reform Act of 1925, as well as legislation of the same period concerning other religious establishments, such as the Hindu Religious Endowments Board in Madras Presidency, which provided for the management of Hindu temples, and the Mussalman Wakf Validating Act of 1913 (revised in 1923), meant to ensure that Muslims retained the right to establish and administer *waqf* along guidelines in keeping with government interpretation of the philanthropic (*Appadurai* 1981: 52).

The Legislative Council debates regarding Gurdwara Reform reveal how the case was made for the production of a Sikh governing body for gurdwaras and, in this sense, how colonial governance interacted with Sikh and other interests in the Legislative Council context to produce a particular imagination of the Sikh community, in administrative terms, in relation to larger all-India concerns and definitions of the religious and its place in the public sphere (*Murphy* 2013). This is reflected in other locations as well: Arjun *Appadurai* has shown how the evolving conditions of the colonial state’s role in managing south Indian Hindu temples, for example, provided a local instance of broader discourse over the management of religious sites, such that “the judges of the High Court of Madras . . . [sought in the period of 1878 to 1916] to legally define a sectarian electorate for the temple and in the process encourage a variety of groups to refine their political self-conceptions and to use legal language and legal categories to pursue their interests” (*Appadurai* 1981: 181). The impact of these administrative innovations on endowments for religious institutions had a wide range of largely unforeseen consequences. Indeed, as *Appadurai* has argued regarding the British administration of Hindu temples in the Tamil region:

> British efforts to “manage” conflict in the temple [in question] had the twin effects of forcing the British to act in accordance with the structural and cultural needs of the temple community and of providing natives with a fresh set of categories within which to frame their interests in the redistributive process of the temple.  
> (*Appadurai* 1981: 17)

The status of the owner and the rightful managing body of the religious institution becomes central in this legislation and is defined in various ways for different religious communities in British India; this is one of the key, and again largely unintended, political effects of this range of administrative mechanisms. It is the acceptance of these different modes of description of the definition of “community” that re-inscribed differences and conflicts among and within communities. This process in the case *Appadurai* examines provided for caste and sect as determining factors in the definition of an institution’s community (*Appadurai* 1981: 188–89). Although it has been commonly accepted that the designation of Hinduism as a single religious designation is a colonial product, it has been less commonly acknowledged that so, too, was the notion of Hinduism as a *not bounded* religion. This assumption encouraged the articulation of a broad, encompassing notion of Hinduism in contradistinction to the narrower definitions engaged for Sikhism and Islam (*Murphy* 2012: ch. 6). In the Gurdwara context, historical precedent and the ensuing right of the community were invoked in relation to the codification of the definition of who is a Sikh—a preoccupation of the colonial state in general, of course,
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and one that was then formally enacted with the passage of the Gurdwara Reform Act of 1925 (Murphy 2012: ch. 7).

In the end, the distinctions among the different methods implemented for the administration of different religious sites in colonial India had a powerful effect. Whereas in the case of Hindu temples, individual temple-managing committees were defined along sect and caste lines, within a broad definition of Hinduism, the Sikh community was designated as a single corporate body, responsible for the management of all historically defined gurdwaras through a single representational governing body, the Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, or SGPC. It is no coincidence then that the Gurdwara Act of 1925 therefore also defined formally who is a Sikh, delineating the limits and core of the community. In debate over Gurdwara reform and the designation of the proper governing individuals/bodies for these institutions, we see the articulation of a tightly bounded religious community, who constitutes it, and how it should act. This body was created to represent the interests of the entire religious community as a whole. This is in contrast to how Hindu temples were managed, as well as how waqf were administered. In the former case, temples were seen to be inherently local in their character and in this way expressed the highly decentralized and diverse nature of “Hinduism” as understood by the colonial state; at the same time, this loose definition was upheld as an overarching concept that encompassed others. In the latter case, a homogenized and elite understanding of Islam was followed in the designation of rightful Islamic practice, marginalizing local customs (Kozlowski 1985). Local controls would, however, be maintained for specific endowments (Murphy 2012).

The new set of administrative and legislative systems that emerged in the early twentieth century both brought about and reflected the transformation of the Sikh historical imaginary described in brief earlier—linked to the geographical landscape of the unfolding of the Sikh past but multivalent and capacious, encompassing the broad travels of the Gurus and the locations associated with their presence—to one fundamentally related to a new sense of territoriality that emerges in the colonial period, drawing upon and significantly modifying pre-existing precolonial/early modern formations of territoriality in an agrarian context. David Ludden’s discussion of agrarian territoriality is useful in framing this transformation. In the medieval and early modern periods, Ludden has argued, state formation was characterized by “flexible agrarian alliances among farmers, warriors, merchants, ritualists, kings, and literati” that participated in sacred territorialization projects (Ludden 1999: 65). Landholding thus took place alongside a wide range of economic and social practices in the premodern and early modern periods in relation to the granting of honours and emblems to articulate forms of sovereignty. Under the new property provisions instituted with the permanent settlements implemented under British rule, we see an altered form of territory, articulated through ownership and connected to single and exclusive owners. We have seen in the data presented previously that, most commonly, individuals were named within religious grants; only very rarely were other recipients named, such as the Guru Granth Sahib (but through a human caretaker) or in the Jogi establishment at Jakhbar. The body to be designated as the rightful owner/controller of religious property became a highly contentious issue early on in the formation of the East India Company state and even more so under direct Crown rule as the state sought to identify the appropriate “owners” of religious sites. In the solving of this “problem,” particular understandings of community and property were institutionalized. Debate and conflict over the administration of religious sites was not unique to the Sikh community and the Gurdwara Reform Movement—religious institutions and their management were contested all over India in response to an inconsistent and sometimes contradictory state orientation towards them. The community associated with/designated for a religious site had to be determined: this was the basic premise of the legislation that sought to decouple the state from religious sites. In so doing, a religious body was determined,
and for the Sikh community, a body was sought to represent the interests of Sikhs as a whole. This corporate representative body for all Sikhs was defined and administered through the Act in relation to places that were seen to represent and embody, in a unique way, Sikh history: the itihāsik or historical Gurdwara. The fight for Sikh control of gurdwaras expressed in the Gurdwara Reform Movement thus represented the culmination of a transition in the making of the historicality of place in Sikh contexts in relation to a new kind of territoriality and a new logic of ownership by and for the community.

Conclusions

The overall debate over the management of Sikh religious sites culminated in the Gurdwara Reform or Akali Movement of the 1920s. This movement has been the subject of considerable study, particularly since it proved to be the first significant and widespread mobilization of Sikhs in opposition to colonial rule, as other forms of resistance coalesced in the period. The 1919 unrest (and the infamous Jallianwala Bagh incident), and then at the same time the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movements, expressed growing anti-colonial sentiment, as South Asians and particularly Punjabis returned in significant numbers from the fighting in World War I. In 1922, V.W. Smith, superintendent of police in the Criminal Investigation Department of Punjab, declared the Akali or Gurdwara Reform Movement a “cause of much greater concern and anxiety than [the] civil disobedience campaign instituted by Mr. Gandhi.” He identified specific reasons for this:

A spirit of fanaticism which cannot be exorcised has permeated the ranks . . . of the Akalis. Gandhi’s propaganda makes its appeal mainly to the urban classes, which lack both the stamina and physical courage to oppose successfully even small bodies of police; the Akali campaign is essentially a rural movement, and its followers are men of fine physique with a national history of which the martial characteristics have been purposely kept alive both by Government and the Sikhs themselves. Finally, the national volunteer is unarmed, whereas the Akali has acquired the right to arm himself with an obsolete, but none the less formidable, offensive weapon.36

Mr. Smith’s statement is rife with stereotypes that are well known to any observer of the colonial period: the “effeminate” urban classes and the “fanaticism” (and dangerous physical power) of the Sikhs. What is perhaps most striking, however, is the opposition posited here between what is deemed an urban movement—the civil disobedience movement—and the Gurdwara Reform Movement, for there were in fact close ties between the Akali movement and the Non-Cooperation movement on both leadership levels and in overall approach. Ruchi Ram Sahni (1863–1948), Punjabi intellectual, witness to the Gurdwara Reform Movement, and member of the Punjabi Legislative Council, thus described the Gurdwara movement as “the best and most inspiring instance of Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings of non-violence in thought, word and deed” (Sahni 1940s[?]: i) and said that “Mahatma Gandhi himself could not have expected more faithful followers to carry out his non-violent non-cooperative struggle in the face of the gravest provocation” (Ibid: iv). Indeed, in response to an Akali victory in 1922, Gandhi sent a congratulatory telegram to Sardar Kharak Singh, President of the not yet legally sanctioned SGPC, which had been formed by members of the Sikh community as a counter to then-current government administrative mechanisms for gurdwaras, until it was eventually accepted by the government as the sole representative administrative body to govern Sikh shrines in 1925 in Punjab; Gandhi’s telegram in 1922 read: “first decisive battle for India’s
freedom won, congratulations” (Singh 1965: xi). Through the subsequent Gurdwara Reform Act of 1925, a Sikh historical landscape was defined in place and in relation to a definition of Sikh identity (Murphy 2012: Chapter 6–7).

Historical sites became a particularly charged arena for the articulation of Sikh positions within a range of evolving colonial realms of signification, as the “historical gurdwara” came to be fixed as property in direct relation to polemics over who is a Sikh. “Sikhness” thus came to be constituted as a singular and unchanging category in relation to property, which provided objectivized evidence of the Sikh past alongside the movement toward the objectification of Sikhness as a set of beliefs (Murphy 2012: ch. 4). It has been shown that history and the past mattered a great deal in precolonial Sikh discourses. But in the colonial regime of meaning and power, Sikhness was wedded to history in relation to place as possession in relation to a particular politicized notion of identity. This produced a new kind of territoriality (Murphy 2012: chs. 5–8). David Ludden has argued that “many social movements that moderns might call ‘religious’ might be better understood as formations of agrarian territorialism”: tied to the articulation of a king’s sovereignty through the granting of honours and rights (Ludden 1999: 85). The movement for gurdwara management, and the formation of the SGPC, can be seen as a transformation of an early modern form of agrarian territorialism, altered and inflected within the territorial logic of the East India Company and later Crown rule of property, to create a new Sikh territorialism with shifting relations to state sovereignty and animated by a communitarian imagination of the past that was inherited, but also transformed, from earlier times.

As I noted in my 2012 monograph, cultural history is not the place to determine the needs and requirements of the present. The quest for an independent Punjab for the Sikhs is not therefore a thing of the past: it is grounded in the now and in a future that some aspire to. It reflects today the political realities of postcolonial India, and the genesis of the movement for Sikh territory must be seen as a product of complex historical developments that emerge out of the colonial period and move into the postcolonial period. They do not simply reflect a fixed and ahistorical understanding of Sikh territory. The point made here is also a larger one: it addresses a line of questioning pursued in different ways by Partha Chatterjee and Christopher Bayly, examining the loyalties and affinities that came to be mapped in partial terms at times, and overdetermined terms at others, with the idea of the nation in South Asia. While important, Bayly’s attempt to map prior patriotisms to the formations of nationalism did not take fully into account the ways in which those precursors to nationalism were changed through interaction with the colonial state; he posits continuity as a means of accounting for that which persists from the past, paying insufficient attention to how such continuities are fundamentally formed by the context they are found within.37 There is no simple continuity between any pre-modern loyalty and the modern notion of the nation, as the “national” itself has been (and, indeed, must be) configured in diverse ways in modernity. Questioning the assumption of continuity is important: it can allow us to reconsider the historical justifications made in claims to the nation and discover what other options may exist within it.

Notes
1 Quote from https://referendum2020.org/faq, accessed August 13, 2019. This information is still available as of August 2, 2020, under the question “What is Punjab referendum 2020?” The material on the site has been significantly reorganized since 2019; it changes relatively frequently. Voting is now taking place utilizing a form available on the website: https://referendum2020.org/downloads, accessed August 2, 2020.
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5 This is according to the 2011 Census of India. See: www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html, accessed September 28, 2019. Sikhs are a 70% majority in rural areas of the state.
6 See Adi Granth/Guru Granth Sahib, p. 153 (first quotation); p. 33 (second quotation). The term duāta is commonly used to indicate the means to an end or a goal, such as mokh duāna, the doorway to mokṣa or liberation. See discussion, Murphy (2012).
7 For useful discussion of territory in relation to the language of place-making, see Casey, Getting Back into Place, xxvi.
9 For use of the term, see Mohinder Singh (2002a, 2002b), Mohinder Singh and Rishi Singh (2002), and Bhayee Sikandar Singh and Roopinder Singh (2012).
10 Bachitar Natak, ch. 4, v. 1–2.
11 It was in the reign of Akbar that the province of Lahore was reorganized to encompass the five doabs and the term Punjab was in use at that time. The first history of “the Punjab” was written by Ganesh Das at the beginning of the colonial period, the Chat Bagh-i-Punjab (Grewal 2004: 9).
12 The second and third lines are transposed in the Gurmukhi version published by Padam (Padam, ed. 1998 [1977]: 61). I give the order of the the Shahmukhi (Urdu/Perso-Arabic script) text by Sabir (Sabir, ed. 1986: 2–3). Although Waris Shah’s text is not available in a critical edition, the Sabir version is regarded as the strongest published version. There are substantial variants in published editions, particularly when comparing Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi versions; we can see this clearly when comparing Sabir (1986) with Ghumman, ed. (2007: 1), as well as Padam, ed. 1998 [1977]. For example, in this verse, famous (mashhūr) replaces mā’mān and makān replaces muqām in Padam’s version. For a discussion of versions, see Deol 2002.
13 There are many similar articulations of the region in Shah’s text; see also verses 56, 141, 311, 364, et al. in Sabir, ed. (1986).
14 On the imagination of place and region in Waris Shah’s text, see Anne Murphy (forthcoming).
15 This section of the essay draws heavily on Murphy 2012: ch. 5.
16 See also Mohammed (2002: 47–48). This is notably similar to the role local religious elites played under colonial rule in Punjab, as discussed at length by David Gilmartin (1988).
18 For parallels in South India, see discussion in Dirks (1987).
19 Compare Habib (1999); Banga (1978). Interestingly, Banga’s 1978 study of the agrarian system of the Sikhs assumes property ownership, but given its reliance upon British records, this is not surprising.
20 See Caton (2003: 161ff.) for a discussion of the problem in relation to evolving British notions of property. Changes in the leadership of religious institutions also required confirmation of grants. Also see Goswamy and Grewal (1967: 31). This was in keeping with Mughal administrative policies: each subsequent ruler confirmed the revenue-free grants confirmed by prior rulers, because these grants were fundamentally political in nature; even when Aurangzeb designated such rights as heritable, he emphasized their status as loans. Thus the example Goswamy and Grewal present from Pindori, which indicates the sale of madad-i-ma’āṣh property (Goswamy and Grewal 1968: 35, 185–188). See Major (1996: 25ff).
21 For discussion of how the larger transition in property rights impacted the imagination of the ownership of Gurdwaras, see Murphy (2012: ch. 5).
22 See Banga (1978: 171–172); Major (1996: 24–25). Banga contends that Sikh rulers “encouraged the actual cultivators as against the holders of superior ownership” (1978: 171); her sources in this section, however, are primarily British, which leaves room for debate, since the comments so clearly reflect the debates that ensued regarding who the holders of ownership were (the cultivators or hereditary village leaders). Major describes the Lahore state as “proto-modern,” in that “its territorial sovereignty, especially along the western and southern boundaries, was frequently but a ritualistic hegemony backed
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up by periodic displays of naked force,” encouraging relative autonomy at the peripheries and effective administrative control only at the centre (Major 1996: 19).

23 Elsewhere Radha Sharma argues that “agricultural land was heritable and alienable through sale, gift or mortgage” (2005: 144).

24 Mughal grants were confirmed by Sikh leaders who preceded the rise of Ranjit Singh’s centralized administration, as well as by Ranjit Singh himself; see the examples in Goswamy and Grewal (1968: 227–229, 235–237, 251–254, 271–273).

25 See discussion, Murphy, Materiality of the Past, 162–163.

26 For full discussion of this corpus of documents, see Murphy (2012: ch. 5); for consideration of the evidence in this body of texts for identity-formation in pre-British Punjab, see Murphy (2019a).

27 See also Banga and Grewal (1987: 73; document 383).

28 Khalsa Darbar Records vol. 13 and 14. See more extensive discussion in Murphy, Materiality of the Past, ch. 5.

29 Khalsa Darbar Records B. 5, V. 8, records 141, 143, 145, 159.


31 On Gur Sobhā and the imagination of the Khalsa, see Murphy (2012: ch. 3).

32 Broader transformations in the notion of property itself also contributed to this change; see Murphy (2012: 177–183).


34 Act No. XX, Section 1, of 1863, IOL v/8/39. IOR L/P&J/5/3 for proposed bills, statements of objects and reason, and final published bill.


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